

NORTHERN VIRGINIA LONG-TERM CARE UPDATE

INFORMATION AND ISSUES FROM THE NORTHERN VIRGINIA LONG-TERM CARE OMBUDSMAN PROGRAM

Communication with Family Members of Residents with Alzheimer's Disease

Communication with families is important. This is especially true for families of residents with alzheimer's disease (AD) because families may not be able to rely on the resident for factual information. They will depend on the facility staff more than any of the other families in the facility. They experience all the difficult feelings any family does when a loved one moves to a long-term care facility, but AD makes it even worse. Some AD residents "improve" or start looking better with the structure, predictability, and simple routine of the facility. Families may have difficulty accepting that "a place with strangers" makes their relative more comfortable than they could.

Because of the behavioral and communication problems associated with AD, families will expect the staff and doctors to routinely check for all signs of potential illness, infection or injury. Many families feel more secure once the AD patient is in a health care setting with staff trained to observe and treat acute conditions. It's "not knowing" that makes so many families unsure-is he/she in pain?

Hungry? Scared? Abused? Neglected? Injured? Ill? The staff's goal will be to share their understanding of the resident and the disease process with the family-gradually, not all at once.

Families, as well as residents, need orientation to facility routines. They appreciate written information with names to speak to and what to speak to them about. They appreciate consistent staff they can learn to trust and work with over time. They need clear procedures for the "what-ifs" of care. What will be done for acute illnesses or injuries? When will they be notified? How can they communicate with the attending doctor? Are they welcome at meals, activities?

On admission, the primary family caregiver can be the best source of information. Many families prepare letters or written descriptions of routine care and preferences for the resident's chart upon admission. The fewer changes in care routine during the admission adjustment, the more quickly the resident will adjust. However, families must be prepared for the unexpected, i.e., baths are given only twice a week, meals are served in a dining room.

Many families feel their questions might appear stupid or might aggravate the staff in a way that

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Northern Virginia Long-Term Care Ombudsman Staff

Rita Schumacher, *Director*
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Laura Nichols, *Assistant Ombudsman*
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Jacquie Woodruff, *Assistant Ombudsman*
Visit NVLTCOP's website at:
**[www.co.fairfax.va.us/service/aaa/html/
Ombud_main.htm](http://www.co.fairfax.va.us/service/aaa/html/Ombud_main.htm)**

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will encourage staff to “take it out on their relative.” Staff should give families opportunities to talk when they are not rushed either special meetings for new families, or suggest the best time of day for them to talk with staff. It’s staff’s attitude of interest, availability, and willingness to work with them in the care of their relative that will be evaluated. Most family members can’t evaluate a staff member’s technical competence. But the manner in which he/she interacts with their relative tells them a lot about the staff.

Be prepared for AD families to have difficulty with visiting. Many are disappointed when their family member does not remember the visits, accuses them of stealing, is apathetic or withdrawn, or looks messy. Families appreciate suggestions on how to improve the quality of their visits for themselves and for the patient. Facilities with active family visitors are generally seen as ideal places to work or live.

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Volunteer Ombudsmen Recognized for their Tireless Efforts

The Ombudsman Program’s fifty-five Volunteer Ombudsmen were honored at a special reception in May held at Meadowlark Gardens in Vienna, Virginia. On hand to express their appreciation for these advocates’ hard work were Joani Latimer, the new State Long-Term Care Ombudsman for the Commonwealth of Virginia, Richard Risk, Fairfax Commission on Aging Chair, Helen McMahon, Arlington Commission on Aging Chair, Harris Spindle, Executive Director of the Virginia Association of Area Agencies on Aging and members of the Ombudsman Program’s Policy Board.

Grace Starbird, the new Director of the Fairfax Area Agency and Chair of the program’s Policy Board, cited the following statistics: In the year ending March 31, 2001, the Volunteer Ombudsmen made 1,807 nursing facility visits and 1,352 assisted living facility visits. In all, they contributed 7,454 hours. The volunteers provided regular access to ombudsman services to residents in a total of 66 facilities throughout the region. Ms. Starbird observed that the ombudsmen didn’t look nearly as tired, as she would have expected!

Three ombudsmen, Maggie Lee, Mary Moore, and Katherine Layton, were given special recognition for five years of service. Others were recognized for various accomplishments, such as being an effective two-person team assigned to one facility; persevering in the face of considerable turnover in one facility’s administrative staff; and undertaking a personal project to enhance the quality of life for Jewish residents.

Communication Corner

Gestures, A Useful Communication Technique

Gestures are a three-dimensional language that can be effective when words fail to get the point across. While verbal language deteriorates, the nonverbal messages found in gestures, facial expression, voice tone, and body posture are very powerful methods of communication.

Before using gestures, be aware of any cultural differences in the meaning of these gestures. Persons with Alzheimer's disease (AD) will best understand gestures that were familiar to them prior to their dementia diagnosis. When using gestures, makes sure to face the person; alert him or her to your presence; and use slow, exaggerated movements.

Encourage persons with AD to use gestures when they are unable to say what they want to say. Through modeling the use of gestures, they will get the idea.

Useful common gestures:

- Mimicking and exaggerating movements to indicate functional activities, such as washing hands and face, eating, brushing teeth, combing hair, using the telephone, taking a drink from a glass
- Waving hello or good-bye

- Beckoning (outstretching a hand and bringing it back to yourself)
- Indicating a chair of place at the table with an outstretched hand, or sitting down in the chair first to show what you want the person to do
- Pointing or indicating with the whole hand toward yourself or others as you identify yourself or others by name
- Sliding your arm gently under the person's elbow, to indicate that you want the person to come with you

Source: Debra Marks Carlson, MSN, RN, CS and Betty G. Foster, PHD, Reaching Communities with Alzheimer's Education, Advanced Train-the-Trainer Manual. Reprinted with permission from Eymann Publications, Inc., specializing in newsletters related to geriatric caregiving and issues of aging. **Alzheimer's Care Guide** is available for \$35 for a one-year subscription, 12 issues. Call or write Eymann Publications, Inc., P.O. Box 3577, Reno, NV 89505, 1-800-354-3371.

The Communication Corner is a new addition to our newsletter. Each issue will address information on dementia and dementia-related diseases. Please address comments to ythom1@co.fairfax.va.us

WE HAVE A NEW FAX NUMBER!

703-324-3575.



News...

The Northern Virginia Long –Term Care Ombudsman Program would like to announce the addition of Jacquie Woodruff to the ombudsman staff. Ms. Woodruff will serve as an Assistant Ombudsman. Previously, she worked as an Acting Director of Social Services at a nursing facility, a geriatric case manager, and a certified nurse aide. Ms. Woodruff also served as a Volunteer Ombudsman and a subcommittee chair on Supervisor Penny Gross’s Senior Citizen Task Force.

Appreciation...

The Northern Virginia Long-Term Care Ombudsman Program would like to express our thanks to the Fairfax County Board of Supervisors in supporting the new position of Assistant Ombudsman!

The Volunteer Ombudsmen are critical to the Program’s mission to serve as an advocate for older persons receiving long-term care services. We are grateful for their tireless efforts!

**NORTHERN VIRGINIA LONG-TERM CARE OMBUDSMAN PROGRAM
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Serving the City of Alexandria and the Counties of Arlington, Fairfax, Loudoun, and Prince William through their Area Agencies on Aging.
